

**IAPR POLICY BRIEF SERIES**

**A TALE OF TWO CITIES:  
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESSES  
IN BANFF AND CALGARY\***

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Policy Brief No. 07001

March 2007

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\* I would like to thank Larissa Muller, Leslie Taylor, Gerry Laing, Patricia Gordon, and Byron Miller for agreeing to read, and comment on, earlier drafts of this paper. None of them is responsible for any remaining errors or omissions in my analysis.

# **A Tale of Two Cities: Public Participation Processes in Banff and Calgary**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

As the education and income levels of Canadians have risen, and as access to electronic media have made citizens better-informed about the political system, pressure has been placed on governments to provide their electorates with greater involvement in the public policy process.

Initially, governments responded to this pressure by inviting the public to attend forums at which they could express their opinions about major policy issues. Gradually, as citizens became aware that their views would have greater weight if they were more knowledgeable about the alternatives, forums were supplemented with technical materials presented in brochures and at information meetings. For example, when designing major roadways, it has become common for governments to have their engineers present alternative routes and configurations to the public. These developments have made government decision-making much more open and transparent, and have given citizens greater control over the policies that affect them.

Nevertheless, there has been a growing interest recently in an even more direct form of public participation, usually referred to as “consensus-building.” In this process, citizens do not just stand up in public meetings and voice their opinions, leaving the ultimate decisions to government officials. Rather, representatives of interested groups are brought together and invited to design the government policy themselves. Proponents of this model argue that it is particularly promising in situations in which there are strong conflicting opinions among members of the public – for example, when commercial developers and environmental advocates differ over the use of public lands. It is argued that if all of the interested parties are required to reach a consensus, the policies they

devise will be more representative of the broad views of citizens as a whole than will the decisions reached by civil servants.

Despite a considerable amount of theoretical interest in consensus-building, primarily from academics and government administrators, there has only been a relatively small number of instances in which this process has been implemented formally. Accordingly, it has been difficult to test many of the predictions that have been made about the nature of the bargaining process. This has led researchers to investigate policy-making processes that are similar to consensus-building, to see whether lessons can be learned from them. That is the purpose of this policy brief. Specifically, this paper will analyse two public involvement processes that have been conducted in southern Alberta in the last decade: imagineCalgary, completed in 2006, and the Banff Bow Valley Study, completed in 1996.

Although neither of these processes was designed explicitly for consensus-building, both provided a much greater level of public involvement than has been common in government policy-making. As a result, lessons can be learned from both about how a formal consensus-building process might work, and about what the difficulties might be in implementing such a process.

In this paper, the Banff and Calgary studies will be contrasted on the basis of six characteristics:

- the factors that instigated the studies;
- the government's degree of commitment to implement the study's recommendations;
- the nature of the public opinion surveys conducted in conjunction with the studies;
- the structure of the direct participation processes;
- the depth of research available to participants;
- the breadth of the issues that were to be considered by the process; and
- the value of the studies' recommendations for policy formation.

In each case, I will ask whether the public participation process chosen allowed broadly representative groups of citizens to become directly involved in the *development* of public policy (rather than simply in the *expression* of their opinions). I will not, however,

consider the much broader question of whether direct forms of public participation are *desirable*. First, however, I provide brief descriptions of the two processes.

## II. THE PROCESSES

### 1. The Banff Bow Valley Study

The goal of the Banff Bow Valley Study was to develop a set of criteria that administrators could use to identify “appropriate uses” for Banff National Park. Most commonly these criteria would be applied when conflicts arose between human use of the park and environmental protection.

The Study was divided into two components: a research group, headed by a Task Force, and a public participation component. The latter took the form of a “Roundtable,” which was composed of representatives from the twelve different groups that had expressed an interest in the appropriate use of the park.<sup>1</sup> The Roundtable met for two full days at a time, twice a month for approximately a year.

### 2. Imagine Calgary

The goal of imagineCalgary was to develop “a long range vision of a sustainable Calgary...” where “long range” was defined to be one hundred years; and “sustainable” was to be defined in accordance with the Rio Summit’s “Three Pillars of Sustainable Development:”

- *Social progress*: equity, social cohesion, social mobility, participation, cultural identity
- *Economic prosperity*: efficiency, stability
- *Environmental protection*: healthy environment for humans, rational use of renewable natural resources, conservation of non-renewable natural resources, participation, cultural identity

The study was divided into three groups: an administration, a Round Table, and five Working Groups. The administration conducted an extensive public opinion survey

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<sup>1</sup> These were: commercial: outdoor recreation (e.g. skiing), commercial, visitor services (e.g. hotels), culture, environment-local, environment-national, first nations, government-federal, government-municipal, infrastructure/transportation, social/health/education, and tourism. The administrators of the Study, the Task Force, also had a seat at the table.

and provided some research support. The Round Table, which was composed of 38 civic leaders, was responsible for using the results of the public opinion survey to construct a “vision” statement for the future. Finally, the Working Groups, consisting of between ten and fifteen volunteers each, were to devise targets and strategies for, respectively, the built environment, economy, governance, natural environment, and social system. Each of the Working Groups met, independently of one another, approximately ten times, for two to three hours per time, between November 2005 and March 2006.

### **III. CHARACTERISTICS**

#### **1. Instigation**

The Banff Bow Valley Study arose from a long-running, often acrimonious, debate among a number of interest groups concerning the appropriate level of development of both Banff National Park and the town of Banff. Administrators had made many attempts over the years to resolve these issues, to little avail. The direct involvement of the public was an attempt to obtain “buy in” from the various groups by giving them the opportunity to agree among themselves what the criteria should be for determining the “appropriate uses” of the park’s many natural resources.

ImagineCalgary, on the other hand, was initiated in much calmer political waters. Rather than looking backward, in a sense, to resolve disputes that had already arisen, it was an attempt to look forward, to the kinds of issues that might arise in the future, in order to deal with those issues before they polarized the citizenry.

***Implication:*** Because the issues dealt with in the Banff study had become highly politicized, the organizers had no difficulty obtaining participation from all of the affected groups. Not only did twelve separate groups identify themselves, representatives from all of those groups proved themselves to be willing to devote considerable amounts of time and effort to the public participation process.

ImagineCalgary, however, was established at a time when the public debate over the future of the city was muted at best. The result was that it was difficult to convince the sectors that had been most directly responsible for the growth and health of the economy – such as agriculture, the railway, and the petroleum industry – to make

significant contributions to the planning process<sup>2</sup>. For example, not only did the “Economy” working group in imagineCalgary have no representatives from any of these sectors, most of its participants were from governmental organizations.

The result is that the imagineCalgary study lacked the depth of involvement that the Banff study was able to command. This is not to fault the organizers of imagineCalgary: indeed, they are to be commended for initiating a consultative process *before* political positions became entrenched (as in Banff). Nevertheless, it is a problem of which other participatory processes should be aware: if they are going to obtain the full engagement of their constituents, they will need to do more preparatory work than was available to imagineCalgary.<sup>3</sup>

## **2. Government commitment**

Those who write about public participation processes often argue that it is important that the government provide a strong signal, before the process begins, that it will adopt the recommendations produced by participants. There are two reasons for this. First, if participants do not believe that their recommendations will be taken seriously, they will have less incentive to invest time and effort into the creation of those recommendations. Second, when interest groups have conflicting opinions concerning the optimal direction of public policy, the incentive to make concessions on their preferred positions or to craft innovative solutions is weakened if they do not anticipate that those concessions will be implemented – especially if they anticipate that they will be able to induce the government to ignore any compromise solutions in favour of the outcomes that they prefer. For example, those who favour increased development of freeways cannot be expected to bargain seriously with those who favour increased use of public transit if they believe that the government will ignore the recommendations of the planning process – particularly if they expect that the city’s decision will be to adopt their own position, regardless of the planning outcome.

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<sup>2</sup> Note: When I argue that agriculture, the railway, and the petroleum industry were responsible for the growth of Calgary’s economy, I do not mean to imply that their contributions were intentional. I simply mean that Calgary would have been a far different city today had the railway not passed through this area and if the city had not acted as a major supplier to agriculture and petroleum.

<sup>3</sup> For example, it might be helpful to publicize some polarized alternate future scenarios, in order to obtain a public reaction that will prompt participation.

At the time that the Banff Bow Valley Study was initiated, the government was under attack from all parties. To protect itself from further criticism, the government had a strong incentive to adopt any reasonable proposals that were made by the public review process. This made the government's promise to implement those proposals credible and not only induced all interested parties to come to the table but kept them intensely engaged in the process to the end. Even though the public meetings took up two full days at a time, twice a month for a year, every meeting was well-attended and every proposal was thoroughly and intensely debated.

The commitment of the City of Calgary to implement the recommendations of imagineCalgary was much less credible than was that of Parks Canada to the Banff Bow Valley Study. First, as noted above, imagineCalgary was not devised to resolve a crisis in public policy. Hence, there were few external factors inducing the City to adopt the recommendations of the process. Second, the wording of imagineCalgary literature did not suggest a strong commitment on the part of the City to adopt the participants' recommendations. For example, in a document entitled simply "The Project," the City indicated only that it was "committed to *aligning* its key plans to [imagineCalgary's] 100 year vision." (italics added). There was no promise to adopt the specific strategies and targets developed by the project.

***Implication:*** In neither the Banff study nor imagineCalgary did the lack of commitment on the part of the governing body deter participants from developing lengthy, detailed lists of recommendations. Both studies offered over 100 suggestions for government policy.

Where the effect of the relative lack of commitment on the part of the City of Calgary became apparent was with respect to the internal consistency of the study's recommendations. Whereas the recommendations contained within the Banff final report were consistent with one another, the recommendations in imagineCalgary's "Long Range Urban Sustainability Plan" (June 2006) lacked consistency. For example, although that Plan calls for reduced housing prices, it also recommends the placement of significant restrictions on the use of land for housing; although it calls for reduced costs of food, it also calls for increased purchases of locally-grown products; and although in

many places the Plan recommends that restrictions be placed on the actions of local businesses, it simultaneously calls on the City to “develop the most favourable environment for business...” Similarly, although the Plan contains many recommendations for programs that would increase government expenditure, there is no recognition in the Plan that these expenditures could be expected to lead to higher taxes.

It is possible that these inconsistencies arose, at least in part, because the participants in the imagineCalgary process could not be certain that any one of their recommendations would be adopted. It is only important to be concerned with inconsistencies between two proposals if it is anticipated that both proposals will be implemented. If the probability that either will be implemented is small, the incentive to deal with potential inconsistencies is reduced.

### 3. Public Opinion Surveys

Both studies conducted public opinion surveys to provide decision-makers with information about public preferences. In Banff, detailed surveys of park users, park businesses, and local citizens were conducted. The results of these surveys appear to have been available to participants in the public participation process.

In Calgary, 18,000 citizens responded to five open-ended questions about the perceived advantages and disadvantages of living in Calgary, and about the future that citizens saw for their city. Although the results of this survey could have provided useful information for participants, they became available so late in the participation process that they had very little impact on the Sustainability Plan.<sup>4</sup>

**Implication:** For political reasons<sup>5</sup>, the imagineCalgary process was completed very quickly. The result was that a summary of the public opinion survey was not available until the public participation process was almost finished. If other cities are genuinely interested in hearing what their citizens think, and incorporating those views into their

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<sup>4</sup> It appears, however, that the survey was used extensively by the group that drafted the imagineCalgary “vision,” (a brief statement of the principles on which future decisions should be made).

<sup>5</sup> The mayor was anxious to present the outcome from the imagineCalgary process to an urban conference that was held in June 2006.



planning processes, they would be advised to initiate their public opinion surveys well before their planning processes got underway.

Furthermore, cities might be advised to employ more structured interviews than were used by imagineCalgary, as one of the reasons it took so long to tabulate the imagineCalgary survey was that the 18,000 respondents were given open-ended questions.

#### **4. Structure of Participation Process**

In the Banff Bow Valley Study it was anticipated that each of the individuals at the Roundtable would act as a representative of his or her group and would report to, and take direction from, the members of that group. Hence, although only twelve individuals had a direct voice at the table, most of those individuals spoke for many hundreds, if not thousands, more.

The Roundtable met for two full days at a time, twice a month for approximately a year. Each meeting was held in public and the public was provided with some opportunity to make presentations and to ask questions. During that year, the Task Force undertook scientific research concerning the impacts of alternative policies on the ecology and economy of Banff National Park. As the results of this research, and research conducted by the member groups at the Roundtable, became available, they were provided to the members of the Roundtable to inform their opinions.

In the imagineCalgary process, each of the Working Groups met approximately ten times, for two to three hours per time. Members of the public were not invited to these meetings; and only a limited number of the participants represented larger groups. The five groups primarily worked independently of one another.<sup>6</sup>

***Implication:*** Whereas the members of the Banff Roundtable were chosen explicitly to represent the various interest groups in the area, and the Roundtable discussions were held in public, most of the participants in the imagineCalgary Working Groups represented only themselves and their discussions were held in private. The result is that the recommendations of the imagineCalgary study cannot be expected to stand up as well

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<sup>6</sup> This led to some of the problems of coordination discussed in the preceding section.

to public criticism as did the recommendations of the Banff Study. Whereas defenders of the latter can argue that the Roundtable's recommendations were reached by a representative group, meeting in the public eye; defenders of the imagineCalgary recommendations can make no such argument.

## 5. Research

When planning for the ecological and economic development of a city or region, there are two types of decisions that have to be made: those concerning *technical issues* and those concerning *preferences*. "Technical issues" refer to the identification of alternative possible techniques for achieving public ends, including the estimation of the types of costs and benefits that are likely to flow from each of those techniques. "Preferences" concern choices among techniques, *given* that those techniques have been identified.

For example, assume that the citizens of a city have expressed a desire to reduce the average amount of commuting time to and from work. In the first step, a technical analysis might identify, for example, that the alternative means for achieving this end are: (i) to improve the road system from the suburbs to the city centre; (ii) to build a subway system; or (iii) to induce businesses to move from the city centre to the suburbs.

The technical analysis might then also measure (or, at least, list) the costs and benefits of each of these proposals. With respect to the third proposal, for example, the technical analysis might report on the alternative techniques that other cities had used to encourage relocation, such as increasing taxes on businesses in the city centre, or offering tax incentives to businesses that relocated to the suburbs. It would also identify the costs of these techniques, such as reducing the attractiveness of the city to businesses that would otherwise have found it advantageous to locate in the city centre.

The resolution of technical issues, such as these, is often best left to experts. The average citizen cannot be expected to know how much a new road or subway system will cost, nor what the spin-off effects would be if the city was to institute a policy of inducing firms to leave the city centre.

Once the set of alternatives, along with a statement of their costs and benefits, has been identified, however, it is appropriate to leave the selection among those alternatives to the citizens of the city. As it is the citizens who will have to pay for the costs of

building, say, a subway, and as it is they who will benefit from any improvements in commuting time, it is their opinions, and not those of “experts,” that are relevant when determining which alternatives should be chosen. This is the “preference” element of public decision-making.

The Banff Bow Valley Study clearly understood that public decisions have these two components. Accordingly, the Study provided for both a public forum, (the Roundtable), at which citizens could express their preferences among alternatives, and a technical group, which undertook scientific studies of both the alternatives available to the Roundtable and the implications (costs and benefits) of adopting those alternatives. For example, the technical group commissioned studies of human-grizzly bear interaction to identify the impacts of allowing various numbers of hikers and campers to use trails through grizzly habitat; and experts provided scientifically-based advice on wolf-elk and wolf-human interaction.<sup>7</sup>

ImagineCalgary, on the other hand, had no science-based arm and provided very little scientifically based research assistance to participants in the Working Groups<sup>8</sup>. The result is that the strategies and targets set by those Groups often resembled “wish lists,” with little analysis of the costs and benefits of the alternative means for achieving the desired results. For example, as noted above, many of the Groups recommended that the City encourage businesses to relocate out of the central business district, primarily to reduce commuting times, but also to make the downtown more “liveable” and to reduce automobile pollution. Yet, no information was made available to the Working Groups concerning the costs of such a policy. If there are sound business-related reasons for firms to locate in close proximity to one another, for example, a relocation policy could reduce efficiency and discourage firms from moving to Calgary. It is possible that Calgarians would be willing to accept the attendant reduction in growth; but before they can make an informed decision, the costs and benefits need to be identified. ImagineCalgary provided no means to identify those effects.

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<sup>7</sup> The results of the scientific studies were not always available in a timely manner, however. The Roundtable often found itself discussing an issue before the scientific research was available.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the literature from imagineCalgary implies that the organizers had hoped that participants in the Working Groups would be “experts.” It does not appear that this goal was achieved. Most participants were well-informed, but few possessed the technical expertise that I discuss here.

Other recommendations from the Working Groups that would have benefited greatly from background research are that:

- the City institute a “living wage” policy,
- limits be placed on the amount of additional land made available for housing,
- local food producers be subsidised,
- incentives be provided to diversify the city’s economic base,
- housing developers be required to include low-cost housing units in every new development,
- working farms be developed within the city limits,
- the CPR tracks be relocated from the downtown area,
- a community justice model be instituted,
- proportional representation be implemented, and
- campaign contributions and spending both be limited.

In each of these cases, and in many others, the recommendations of the Working Groups simply amounted to suggestions that the City investigate the proposed policy. What was missing was an expression of the public’s *preferences* for one policy over the (many) alternatives. The absence of a significant scientific research component to the imagineCalgary study meant that it was difficult for that study to capture these preferences.

## **6. Breadth of issues**

The goal of the Banff Bow Valley Study was to develop a set of criteria that Banff National Park administrators could use to identify “appropriate uses” when conflicts arose between human use and environmental protection. As human use in the park takes a wide variety of forms – roads, railways, hotels, ski hills, backcountry skiing and hiking, horseback riding, etc. – and as that use affects many aspects of the environment – water quality, animal habitat, vegetation – the potential scope of the inquiry was very broad. Nevertheless, it was restricted to a narrow geographical area (the valley of the Bow River).

The goal of imagineCalgary, on the other hand, was to develop “a long range vision of a sustainable Calgary...;” that is, the Working Groups were to provide a one-hundred year plan for the growth and development of every aspect of the city’s social, economic, and environmental health.

**Implication:** In both processes, but particularly in imagineCalgary, the breadth of the issues to be discussed was so great that participants often found it difficult to absorb the information necessary to make informed decisions about any of them. The result was that the recommendations that came from the citizen participants were not well focused. This may be another reason why, as I commented above, many of imagineCalgary’s recommendations were inconsistent with one another.

## **7. Value to Policymakers**

I opened this commentary by arguing that Canadians have expressed increased interest in forms of public participation because they wish to be involved directly in the formation of policy decisions. This means more than they be asked about the types of issues that are of concern to them: polling companies have been doing that for decades. Once the public’s concerns have been identified, there are two further stages in a process of direct public participation. First, a set of alternative methods for attaining the desired goals must be constructed and the costs and benefits of each must be listed. Second, these alternatives should be provided to members of the public in such a way that they can make informed choices among them. Only then can the public truly be said to have participated directly in the formation of policy.

The Banff Bow Valley Study succeeded in the first of these stages, but not in the second; whereas imagineCalgary succeeded to only a limited extent in either stage.

With respect to the first stage - the statement of alternative policies - the Banff Bow Valley Study was much more successful than imagineCalgary for two reasons. First, whereas the Banff Study employed a research group whose job was to identify alternatives and (more importantly) to obtain scientific information concerning the effects of those alternatives, imagineCalgary lacked such a facility. Second, whereas many of the participants in the Banff Roundtable represented interest groups who had access to their

own research sources, most of the participants in imagineCalgary were involved as individuals, often with little expertise in the issues being discussed. Hence, although participants in imagineCalgary were able to bring a very impressive list of alternatives to the discussion, they were much less successful at identifying the impacts that those alternatives could be expected to have.

With respect to the second stage – citizen selection among alternative policies – neither study was successful. The Banff Bow Valley Study failed in this respect because, ultimately, it did not ask the participants to select among the alternatives that had been identified. Instead, the Roundtable was asked only to identify a set of criteria that *administrators* could use when deciding upon “appropriate uses” of the Park’s resources. What the organizers of the Study did not appear to appreciate is that *lists* of criteria are rarely useful when making decisions, as such lists do not provide information about the relative values the public places on individual criteria. For example, the Banff Roundtable identified “impact on the environment” and “economic effects” as two of the criteria to be employed when determining appropriate use. But knowing that these criteria are both important does not assist Park administrators if they have to decide whether to accept a proposal that, say, improves the environment at the expense of the economy. The result is that the public participation portion of the Banff Study has had very little direct effect on Park policy.

The imagineCalgary process provided even less guidance to policymakers than did the Banff Study. Not only were the Working Groups not asked to select among alternative policy options, they were not asked to suggest criteria for making those selections. The result is that the imagineCalgary participants cannot be said to have been engaged in the determination of public policy. At best, they managed only to recommend a set of options from which government officials might choose. Some might argue that this is the appropriate role for citizen groups. But if the citizens of other cities are seeking a *direct* say in policy formation, imagineCalgary does not provide an attractive model for them to follow.

#### IV. SUMMARY

A number of authors have argued recently that, to allow for true, direct participation in the policymaking process, citizens must, first be given complete information about the options available to them and about the ramifications of each of those options. Second, they must be given the opportunity to interact with one another to select the consensus option that best suits the electorate as a whole. The broad question that directs the research in this field is: what forms of participation are most likely to meet these criteria?

The purpose of this commentary has been to use the experience of two Alberta processes - the Banff Bow Valley Study and imagineCalgary – to cast light on this question. I believe that the most important lessons from the Banff Bow Valley Study and imagineCalgary are:

- If government would like citizen groups to take their deliberations seriously, it must commit, in advance, to implement the recommendations of those groups (or, at least, to make those recommendations a very serious component of the policy-making process).
- Every effort must be made to ensure that all affected groups are involved in the participation process. Otherwise (i) the advice and experience of the excluded groups will be lost and (ii) the excluded groups may object to the policy that is chosen, thereby delaying implementation.
- The distinction between technical decisions and decisions concerning preferences must be recognised and provision must be made for both. “Experts” should be available to provide advice concerning technical issues, and should be excluded from involvement in expressing preferences. Citizen representatives should be asked to make decisions requiring preferences, and should not be expected to develop alternatives that require technical expertise.
- As citizen participants have limited time available to them, it is important that the number and complexity of issues presented to them be restricted to a manageable level.